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Foreword

Sociology for a New Century offers the best of current sociological thinking to today's students. The goal of the series is to prepare students, and—in the long run—the informed public, for a world that has changed dramatically in the last three decades and one that continues to astonish. These goals reflect important changes that have taken place in sociology. The discipline has become broader in orientation, with an ever-growing interest in research that is comparative, historical, or transnational in orientation. Sociologists are less focused on "American" society as the pinnacle of human achievement and more sensitive to global processes and trends. They also have become less insulated from surrounding social forces. In the 1970s and 1980s sociologists were so obsessed with constructing a science of society that they saw impenetrability as a sign of success. Today, there is a greater effort to connect sociology to the ongoing concerns and experiences of the informed public. Each book in this series offers a comparative, historical, transnational, or global perspective in some way, to help broaden students' vision. Students need to be sensitized to diversity in today's world and to the sources of diversity. Knowledge of diversity challenges the limitations of conventional ways of thinking about social life. At the same time, students need to be sensitized to the fact that issues that may seem specifically "American" (for example, struggles over gender equality, an aging population bringing a strained social security and health care system, racial conflict, national chauvinism, the interplay of religion and politics, and so on) are shared by many other countries. Awareness of commonalities undercuts the tendency to view social issues and questions in narrowly American terms and encourages students to seek out the experiences of others for the lessons they offer. Finally, students also need to be sensitized to phenomena that transcend national boundaries—trends and processes that are supranational (for example, environmental degradation). Recognition of global processes stimulates student awareness of causal forces that transcend

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national boundaries, economies, and politics. Using classical and contemporary sociological theory to analyze both traditional topics—such as culture and stratification, culture and identity, sociological approaches to arts and literature—and newer ones including global cultural flows, religious terrorism, and the profound impact of the Internet, *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World* explores the complex interplay between cultures—idea systems, artworks, popular culture, religious beliefs, common sense—and social structures. Within the framework of the "cultural diamond" this book uses a comparative analysis of cultural objects and practices in Nigeria, China, the United States, and other locations around the world to demonstrate how cultural producers and consumers express a changing world through culture and how culture itself contributes to social changes. Chapter-long examinations of the culture construction of social problems and organizational transactions reveal how the application of a culturally informed approach can illuminate seemingly non-cultural issues ranging from those involving social justice to those entailed in practical business operations.

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Preface

Culture fascinates sociologists nowadays, but this was not always the case. When I began teaching, in the early 1980s, material outcomes and structural explanations for social phenomena—such things as income, education, fertility changes, and economic pressures—were under the sociological big top; culture and cultural explanations were a sideshow. True, there were always sociologists who studied religion, values, arts, and the like, and there were always anthropologists whose study of culture influenced sociological thinking. But as a whole, sociology did not pay much attention to culture. As any teacher or student of sociology will know, times have changed. The past several years have witnessed an explosion of cultural studies in sociology, as well as in the adjacent social sciences of political science, psychology, and even economics. This rise of cultural sociology has a number of causes, most generally the inherent limitations of strictly material factors to explain human behavior or to capture human experience. Therefore, most sociologists now view people as meaning makers as well as rational actors, symbol users as well as class representatives, and storytellers as well as points in a demographic trend. Moreover, sociology largely has escaped its former either/or way of thinking. The discipline now seeks to understand how people's meaning making shapes their rational action, how their class position molds their stories—in short, how social structure and culture mutually influence one another. Although all of this is very satisfying to cultural sociologists who no longer have to think of themselves as laboring in the wilderness, problems bedevil teachers and students in the classroom. Everyone wants to talk about symbols, discourse, meaning, and cultural practices, but systematic guides to such discussions are rare. Needed are concise introductions to cultural sociology to help students (1) explore the concept of culture and the nature of its linkages with the social world, (2) enhance their understanding of seemingly structural issues such as poverty or ethnicity by applying cultural analysis to

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these issues, and (3) broaden their cultural and social horizons so that they may operate effectively in the global economy and international culture of the twenty-first century. These are the goals of this book.

The Cultural Diamond

Cultures and Societies in a Changing World will enable students taking broad-ranging courses in sociology or social problems and students taking specialized courses in cultural sociology to think more clearly about the role culture plays in shaping our social world. The book introduces the sociology of culture, the branch of sociology that looks at cultural phenomena—including stories, beliefs, media, ideas, works of art, religious practices, fashions, rituals, specialized knowledge, and common sense—from a sociological perspective. At the same time, it suggests how such cultural phenomena operate in more general social processes. Finally, looking at the culture-society relationship from the other direction, it shows how social forces influence culture. In the book, I use the device of the "cultural diamond" to investigate the connections among four elements: *cultural objects*—symbols, beliefs, values, and practices; *cultural creators,* including the organizations and systems that produce and distribute cultural objects; *cultural receivers,* the people who experience culture and specific cultural objects; and the *social world,* the context in which culture is created and experienced. We examine these elements and connections in Chapters 1 through 4. Then, in Chapters 5 and 6, we discuss how the cultural diamond operates in two specific cases: social problems and business transactions. In Chapter 7, we look at culture and community in the dawning age of global electronic culture. In Chapter 8, we tackle the ever-more-pressing subject of power—political, social, domestic—and examine the role culture plays in exerting or resisting regimes of dominance.

A Global Approach

An international or global outlook is indispensable to any sociological study in today's world, and cultural studies are no exception. This study of culture is global in at least three ways.

Cross-National Cases

First, we consider examples of cultural phenomena and processes from a wide variety of countries and periods. The world has always contained a

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bewildering assortment of cultures, of course, but lately Americans have become increasingly concerned with the implications of this fact for their internal social policies and external economic and political relationships. Although we examine aspects of the Western cultural tradition in general and American culture in particular, we draw on materials from different traditions and cultures as well, including numerous examples from cultures of special interest to Americans, such as Israel and Japan. Four places—Nigeria, China, the Middle East, and the United States—serve repeatedly to demonstrate problems and issues in cultural analysis, because they constitute dramatically different starting points for societies entering the twenty-first century. Nigeria contains an extraordinary mixture of languages, ethnicities, and religions, with no one group in the majority. Under British colonial rule for more than half of the twentieth century, Nigeria struggles to reconcile political unity and cultural diversity while achieving greater economic development. China has had an advanced culture and centralized political control for millennia, but revolutionary political change in the mid-twentieth century has brought about massive social and cultural dislocations. Now China has embarked on an experiment with hitherto unheard of dimensions: to see whether economic freedom can flourish while tight political and cultural controls remain. The Middle East has dominated the headlines, hopes, and fears of the twenty-first century as pressures for social and cultural change collide with authoritarian regimes and strongly held traditions. Finally, the United States, along with its Western European allies, dominated the bipolar Cold War era of the mid-twentieth century. It seemed to represent the pinnacle of advanced, industrial society, complete with a modern culture, toward which all societies presumably were converging. Now the fracturing of former political alliances and the new complexity of international relations, along with the increasingly undeniable claims made by culturally diverse groups internally, challenge the validity of a specifically American culture and the applicability of American values in a troubled and rapidly changing world. For these reasons, Nigeria, China, and the United States offer thought-provoking running examples of some of the most perplexing culture problems facing the new century.

Global Culture

The second way in which this book is global in scope is that we consider how globalization processes themselves are affecting culture and cultures. From transnational media to tourist art to the immigration of peoples to international production of manufactured goods, processes taking place at the global level have all but obliterated pockets of cultural purity and have

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made parochialism increasingly costly as well as naive. Technological advances in communications have leaped cultural boundaries, just as global markets have transcended national differences; indeed, these two factors are closely related. The Internet seems to be both fostering a world culture without boundaries and encouraging a renewed sense of cultural particularism—new boundaries, rooted in ethnicity, religion, and geography. The point is neither to celebrate nor to bemoan these inexorable processes of globalization and differentiation but to understand them.

Cultural Conflicts

Third, many of the most intractable conflicts taking place in the post–Cold War era involve culture. Struggles over ethnic homogeneity and religious fundamentalism, to take just two examples particularly costly in human blood, clearly involve meanings and passions that go far beyond the merely economic or political. Similarly, negotiations between international business partners or heads of state, and more generally relations among people from different cultural backgrounds, can be smoother and more productive if the parties recognize the influences of different cultures. Understanding the cultural bases of past and current struggles and misunderstandings may help avoid repetition of costly mistakes. Such understanding will equip students to live their professional and personal lives as effective and wise citizens of a world where both cultures and societies are changing more quickly than ever before in human history.

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About the Author

Wendy Griswold has a background in both social science and the humanities. She received her doctorate in sociology from Harvard University in 1980 and has a master's degree in English from Duke University. She taught at the University of Chicago from 1981 to 1997. She is the Bergen Evans Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University. She has been associate editor and book review editor of the *American Journal of Sociology* and has been on the editorial boards of *Contexts*, *Poetics*, and *Acta Sociologica*. She is on the Advisory Board for the Centro per lo Studio della Moda e della Produzione Culturale, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan and she is associate editor for *Contexts* and *Poetics*. She has received research support from the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, support from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences, and the European University Institute in Florence. Her research on culture has been international in scope. Her most recent book is *Regionalism and the Reading Class* (2008); she is currently completing a book on the WPA Federal Writers' Project and its impact on American culture. *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria* (2000) won the "Best Book" award for the Sociology of Culture section of the American Sociological Association. Her first book was on the English theater (*Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theatre 1576–1980* [1986]). In addition, she coedited a book on the sociology of literature (*Literature and Social Practice* [1989]) and has written on the sociology of religion, specifically on conflict within churches. Her current research explores cultural regionalism; she is also studying the relationship between the Internet and reading in Africa. She has written an influential paper on sociological methods for cultural analysis ("A Methodological Framework for the Sociology of Culture," *Sociological Methodology* 17 [1987]:1–35); much of her methodological thinking is incorporated in the present book.

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1

Culture and the Cultural Diamond

Culture is one of those words that people use all the time but have trouble defining. Consider the following stories about some of the wildly different things we envision when we talk about culture.

In September 2010 France's Senate voted 246 to 1 to ban women from wearing a full-face veil (niqab or burqa) in public. Many Muslims argue that veiling, which they regard as defending female modesty from intrusive male eyes, is intrinsic to their culture. The minister of justice, on the other hand, says that the ban affirms French cultural values of dignity and equality. Girls growing up under these two cultures may feel torn by the incompatible rules for being a good French citizen and a good Muslim.

On a Friday evening in the college dining hall, a half-dozen students discuss their plans for the weekend. One says she's going to a basketball game, another says he's checking out a hip-hop group playing at a local club, and a third says she's staying in to download some music and watch videos. A fourth mutters, "Study and sleep, just like always, no life," while a fifth counters with "Party!" Then the sixth announces, "Well, guys, you may be wasting the weekend, but *I'm* going to get some culture. Tonight, I'm meeting friends at an art exhibit opening in a gallery downtown, and my girlfriend and I have symphony tickets for tomorrow." His friends start making cracks about him being a culture vulture, while he jokes back about *some people* having more *taste* than other people.

An American conducting business in Tokyo hopes to land a lucrative contract for her firm. When her Japanese counterpart presents his card, she

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takes it casually with one hand, glances at it, and sticks it in her pocket. Subsequent relations with her Japanese prospect prove frosty, and her firm loses the contract. "Ah," says an experienced friend, "you lost out because of a cultural misunderstanding. In Japan, the business card is considered an extension of the person; one treats the card with great respect, holding it with two hands and carefully putting it in a safe place. Americans don't think of it that way; for them, the card is just a convenience. You insulted the very person you were trying to court."

Fitness demands hours in the gym and years of self-denial pursuing the six-pack abs and lean musculature of the cultural ideal. The fit body carries a wealth of meanings—sexual attractiveness, discipline, health—but at the same time advertisers urge consumers to purchase this body, in effect, by spending both time and money (e.g., gym membership, personal trainers). One result is that fitness is more available to the affluent than to the poor. As both cultural ideal and cultural commodity, it helps reproduce class and gender inequalities (Dworkin and Wachs 2009).

In an urban mixed-race neighborhood, sociologist Elijah Anderson (1990) observes casual street encounters in which African Americans appear uncomfortable when they pass Caucasians walking their dogs, despite the dog walkers' assurances that their pets are friendly. This results from a cultural difference, he concludes:

> In the working-class black subculture, "dogs" does not mean "dogs in the house," but usually connotes dogs tied up outside, guarding the backyard, biting trespassers bent on trouble. Middle-class and white working-class people may keep dogs in their homes, allowing them the run of the house, but many black working-class people I interviewed failed to understand such behavior. When they see a white adult on his knees kissing a dog, the sight may turn their stomachs—one more piece of evidence attesting to the peculiarities of their white neighbors. (222)

All five stories involve culture, but each seems to talk about very different things: national customs (handling business cards), activities considered elitist (attending the symphony), personal practices (going to the gym), and local variations in symbolic meanings (what dogs or veils represent). Together they suggest that culture, though rather hard to pin down, is important to understand. Cultural ignorance or misunderstanding, it seems, can lead to highly undesirable outcomes: lost business, interethnic tension, or an inability to participate in either the comic or the transcendent moments in human experience.

What is this concept called culture that can apply to such a wide variety of situations? Why do notions of culture inflame such intense passions that

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huge numbers of people—from sectarians in Mumbai to gang members in Chicago—regularly kill and die for their symbols, their beliefs, and their cultures? Moreover, how can we gain a better understanding of the connections between the concept of culture and the social world? This chapter addresses these questions.

Two Ways of Looking at Culture

When sociologists talk about culture, Richard Peterson (1979) observed, they usually mean one of four things: *norms, values, beliefs,* or *expressive symbols*. Roughly, norms are the way people behave in a given society, values are what they hold dear, beliefs are how they think the universe operates, and expressive symbols are representations, often of social norms, values, and beliefs themselves. In the last decades of the twentieth century, sociologists added a fifth item to the list: *practices*. Culture in this recent view describes people's behavior patterns, not necessarily connected to any particular values or beliefs. We discuss these various meanings later, but for now the point is that even such specialists as cultural sociologists use the word *culture* to stand for a whole range of ideas and objects.

The academic perspectives on culture can be sorted into two schools of thought. It is fair to say that most notions of culture stem from assumptions rooted in either the humanities or the social sciences, particularly anthropology. Although this book presents the social scientific perspective by and large, the distinctiveness of this stance emerges only in comparison with its counterpart in the humanities.

Before we begin, however, we must clarify one thing: Neither "culture" nor "society" exists out there in the real world—only people who work, joke, raise children, love, think, worship, fight, and behave in a wide variety of ways. To speak of culture as one thing and society as another is to make an analytical distinction between two different aspects of human experience. Think of the distinction as such that culture designates the expressive aspect of human existence, whereas society designates the relational (and often practical) aspect. Hugging dogs, paying respect to business cards, working out—these all describe methods for expressing our lives as social beings. The same object or behavior may be analyzed as social (a business card communicates information necessary for economic transactions) or cultural (a business card means something different to a Japanese than to an American). Now, oriented with this rough distinction between the expressive and the relational and with the recognition that both culture and society are abstractions, we may explore the two most influential seedbeds for contemporary thinking about the culture/society relationship.

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"The Best That Has Been Thought and Known"

In common usage, the term *culture* often refers to the fine and performing arts or to serious literature, as in the facetious statement of the art-gallery- and symphony-goer, "*I'm* going to get some culture." Culture in this sense, sometimes called "high culture"—as opposed to popular culture, folk culture, or mass culture—carries implications of high social status. The unthinking equation of culture with the arts results from a line of thinking, prominent in those disciplines collectively known as the humanities, whereby culture signifies a locus of superior and universal worth.

In the nineteenth century, many European intellectuals posited an opposition between culture and society or, as they often put it, between culture and civilization. As they used the term, *civilization* referred to the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution and the accompanying social upheavals. Contrasting culture with civilization was, therefore, a protest against Enlightenment thinking, against the belief in progress as an invariable benefit, against the ugly aspects of industrialization, and against what Marx called the "cash nexus" of capitalism whereby everyone and everything seemed evaluated on an economic basis. If civilization meant filthy tenements, factories spewing smoke into the air, and people treated as nothing more than so many replaceable parts, many thoughtful men and women wanted no part of it. They saw culture—entailing the wisest and most beautiful expressions of human effort—as its contrasting pole and the salvation of over-civilized human beings. This dichotomy set the alienating, dehumanizing effects of industrial civilization against the healing, life-enhancing capacities of culture. Typical of this polarizing tendency was the English social philosopher John Stuart Mill's account, in his autobiography, of how his highly rationalized training in logic and economics brought him to a nervous breakdown. Only by reading Wordsworth's poetry, he testified, could he restore his sanity.

The automatic question that arises today occurred to nineteenth-century thinkers as well: How can we believe in culture's extraordinary, redeeming value without this belief turning into a narrow ethnocentrism, a hymn of praise to Western European culture as the summit of human achievement? Matthew Arnold (1822–1888), a British educator and man of letters, answered this question by formulating a universal theory of cultural value ([1869] 1949). Emphasizing culture's potential influence in the social world, he harshly criticized Victorian England for its mindless materialism and its worship of machines and freedom (in other words, industrialization and democracy) without considering the ends to which either should be put. He feared a result of either dull, middle-class Philistinism or social anarchy

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produced by rioting workers. The aristocrats, whom Arnold dismissed as "barbarians" too busy hunting foxes to bother defending culture, would provide no help. Only culture could save modern society.

What constituted this salvation of humankind? Culture, Arnold asserted, was "a study of perfection." Culture could make civilization more human by restoring "sweetness and light." Although it is now used pejoratively to convey superficial amiability, Arnold intended the expression *sweetness and light* to refer to beauty and wisdom, respectively. He took the idea of sweetness and light from Jonathan Swift's parable about the spiders versus the bees. Everyone thinks spiders are very industrious, Swift observed, but, in fact, spiders work only for themselves; they spin all those webs just to catch their own dinners. Bees, on the other hand, more properly admirable, unselfishly produce benefits for others: honey and the wax used in making candles or, in other words, sweetness and light. Arnold appropriated the more socially productive of Swift's two creatures in his definition of culture. Like the honey and candles that come from bees, the beauty and wisdom that culture provides come from (1) awareness of and sensitivity to "the best that has been thought and known" in art, literature, history, and philosophy and (2) "a right reason" (an open-minded, flexible, tolerant intelligence).

How does culture work? Arnold, the educator, saw culture in terms of its educational potential. He maintained that culture enables people to relate knowledge, including science and technology, to conduct and beauty. Civilization potentially relates harmoniously with knowledge, beauty, conduct, and social relations—a Greco-Roman view—and culture can bring about this harmony. Culture is not an end in itself but a means to an end. It can cure the social ills of unrestrained materialism and self-satisfied Philistinism by teaching people how to live and conveying moral ideas. In a sense, Arnold believed, culture can be the humanizing agent that moderates the more destructive impacts of modernization.

Arnold's conception of culture holds that it addresses a different set of issues from those addressed by logic or science. Surprisingly, German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), whom we shall encounter often in this book, took the same view. In his essay "Science as a Vocation," Weber laid out the limits of what science *cannot* do to set up his arguments about what science *can* do. The limits are what interest us here. What meaning for our lives can science offer? Weber suggested none (1946:143, 153):

> Tolstoi has given the simplest answer, with the words: "Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: 'What shall we do and how shall we live?'" . . . Science today is a "vocation" organized in special disciplines in the service of self-clarification and

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> knowledge of interrelated facts. It is not the gift of grace of seers and prophets dispensing sacred values and revelations, nor does it partake of the contemplation of sages and philosophers about the meaning of the universe.

To answer Tolstoi's question and find a meaning for their lives, Weber asserted, human beings must look to prophets and philosophers, to religion and ideas. Most generally, they must turn to culture.

Weber was a scientist and Arnold a man of letters, but both emphasized the separation of culture from everyday life in modern society and its ability to influence human behavior. This way of looking at culture is traditionally associated with the humanities (although contemporary humanities disciplines are more critical). The traditional humanities viewpoint

- evaluates some cultures and cultural works as better than others; it believes culture has to do with perfection. Deriving from a root word meaning "cultivation," as in agriculture, this sense of culture entails the cultivation of the human mind and sensibility.
- assumes that culture opposes the prevailing norms of the social order, or "civilization." Harmony between culture and society is possible but rarely achieved.
- fears that culture is fragile, that it can be "lost" or debilitated or estranged from socioeconomic life. Culture must be carefully preserved, through educational institutions, for example, and in cultural archives such as libraries and museums.
- invests culture with the aura of the sacred and ineffable, thus removing it from everyday existence. This separation is often symbolically accentuated: Bronze lions, for example, guard the entrance to the Art Institute of Chicago (and many libraries and museums elsewhere). Because of its extraordinary quality, culture makes no sense if we consider only its economic, political, or social dimensions.

It is important to recognize this "traditional humanities viewpoint" as an ideal type, with contradictions and complexities smoothed away for the sake of comparison. Moreover, it describes a rarified "high culture" definition that few contemporary humanities departments would endorse. Nevertheless, this understanding of culture lies deep in most people's thinking. Consider, for example, the revulsion much of the world feels over looters ransacking treasures from the art museums and archeological digs of Iraq. Observers are horrified that looting, and the illicit market for rarities that supports it, reduces something precious and sacred to a mere commodity and in so doing decimates the cultural heritage—"the best that has been thought and known"—of the Iraqi people. Such a value-laden view of culture can often be seen as elitist, but at the same time it is widely held.

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"That Complex Whole"

During the nineteenth century, the new disciplines of anthropology and sociology simultaneously advocated a very different way of thinking about culture than that put forth by Matthew Arnold. An early statement of this position came from the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), who reacted strongly against the smugness of European culture at the end of the eighteenth century. Fascinated by traditional folk verse and the poetry of the Old Testament, Herder regarded such oral literature as spontaneous products of innate human creativity that sharply contrasted with the more artificial literary output of an educated elite. If all humanity comprised natural poets, how absurd to think that the European educated classes had somehow cornered the market on the "best that has been thought and known." Or, as Herder put it:

> Men of all the quarters of the globe, who have perished over the ages, you have not lived solely to manure the earth with your ashes, so that at the end of time your posterity should be made happy by European culture. The very thought of a superior European culture is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature. (Williams 1976:79)

Herder argued that we must speak of cultures, not simply culture, for the obvious reason that nations, and communities within or across nations, have their own, equally meritorious cultures.

This view of culture as a given society's way of life was introduced to English anthropology by E. B. Tylor, who dismissed the whole culture-versus-civilization debate out of hand in his book *Primitive Culture* ([1871] 1958:1): "Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." This wide-ranging anthropological definition of culture has dominated the social sciences, including contemporary sociology, ever since. Sociologist Peter Berger (1969), for example, defines culture as "the totality of man's products," both material and immaterial. Indeed, Berger argued that even society itself is "nothing but part and parcel of non-material culture" (6–7). Although social scientists don't all agree to quite so expansive a definition, they don't agree on much else about culture either. Back in the 1950s when two anthropologists counted the different definitions of culture used in the social sciences, they came up with more than 160 distinct meanings (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952).

Viewing culture as a people's entire way of life avoids the ethnocentrism and elitism that the humanities-based definition falls prey to, but such an

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all-encompassing definition lacks the precision desired in the social sciences. A recent trend leans toward cutting the culture concept down to size and characterizing the object of analysis. Wuthnow and Witten (1988), for example, suggest that sociologists should distinguish between implicit and explicit culture. Sometimes, we regard culture as a tangible social construction, "a kind of symbolic good or commodity that is explicitly produced" (50), as in the case of a fit body or a veil worn by a Muslim woman. At other times, we see culture more abstractly as an "implicit feature of social life . . . a prefiguration or ground of social relations" (50), as in the cultural ground whereby Japanese and Americans handle business cards in different ways or American blacks and whites act differently around dogs. This distinction proves useful, not because either kind of culture is conceptually superior but because it can act as a preliminary classification in sorting out the many definitions of culture with which sociologists must deal. Implicit culture is hard to study, of course; in fact, it's hard to spot in the first place. We will consider ways for sociologists to pin down this elusive concept, but, for now, the point is to recognize these two sorts of culture: explicit, expressive, symbolic forms on the one hand and implicit grounding for action on the other. (Sometimes, the former is seen as the domain of "the sociology of culture," whereas the latter falls under "cultural sociology," but this terminological distinction is not uniformly adopted.)

Unlike the old-school humanists, social scientists of various schools of thought tend to see harmony, not opposition, between culture and society. The two most influential social scientific theories of the twentieth century—functionalism and Marxism—regard the fit as a close one. Functionalism, the branch of social theory that assumes a social institution usually serves some specific function necessary for the well-being of the collectivity, identifies culture with the values that direct the social, political, and economic levels of a social system. In the functionalist perspective, a fit exists between culture and society because any misfit would be dysfunctional. Robert Merton (1938), for example, once suggested that American culture places a high value on economic success. When people lack the practical means to attain the goal of success, he said, they experience severe strain, often turning to criminal behavior as a result. For most people in America and in any culture that functions smoothly, the goals given by the culture and the means for attaining these goals work in harmony. Coming from the opposite direction politically, Marxists also see a close fit between social structure and culture, but they reverse the direction of influence—from social structure to culture, not the other way around. In their view, cultural products, implicit or explicit, rest on an economic foundation. Both functionalism and Marxism are discussed in Chapter 2; for now, note that they share what we might call the "close-fit assumption."

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As an example of this assumption, consider Peter Berger's (1969) analysis of culture as formed through externalization, objectification, and internalization. Berger suggests that human beings project their own experience onto the outside world (externalization), then regard these projections as independent (objectification), and finally incorporate these projections into their psychological consciousness (internalization). We can easily think of cases that seem to illustrate Berger's model. Let's take the fact that human reproduction involves two sexes. Many religious belief systems might be said to externalize the dualism of biological reproduction into dual powers, such as the Manichean worldview of an eternal war between good and evil or the Chinese dualities of yin and yang. Such dualities, based on direct experience, become objectified and exist in the culture independent of any human thinker. Entire cosmologies of contending forces of good and evil thereby grow around the male/female dichotomy. These cosmologies, in turn, become internalized, influencing human thought and practice. Thus, Christians imagine good and evil fighting within the soul—an angel whispering in one ear, a devil in the other—whereas Chinese medicine centers on the perceived need for a yin and yang balance in the body itself.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973:89) defined culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." Geertz's influential formulation is more precise than the entire-way-of-life social science definitions because it focuses on symbols and the behavior that derives from symbolically expressed ways of thinking and feeling. This definition captures what most sociologists currently mean when they use the term *culture*. To recapitulate, the social science standpoint

- avoids evaluation in favor of relativism. As two sociologists once put it, "The scientific rhetoric, tight-lipped and non-normative, brooks no invidious distinctions" (Jaeger and Selznick 1964:654). We may make evaluations in terms of culture's impact on the social order but not of the cultural phenomenon itself.
- assumes a close linkage between culture and society. In some schools of thought, one tends to determine the other, whereas others stress the mutual adjustments that take place between culture and social structure.
- emphasizes the persistence and durability of culture, rather than its fragility. Culture, seen more as an activity than as something that needs preserving in an archive, is not what lies in the museum guarded by those bronze lions; instead, it is the ways museum-goers (and everyone else) live their lives.
- assumes that culture can be studied empirically like anything else. Social scientists do not regard culture as sacred or fundamentally different from other human products and activities.

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Again, this is a simplification to emphasize the contrast between the two standpoints. And again, many twenty-first-century social scientists would reject such aspects of this view as the close-fit assumption (Swidler 2001). If we go back to the example of looting in the Middle East, the social science approach would focus less on the "treasures" being destroyed and more on the practices of the people in the area. It would posit that in a time of upheaval, people respond in ways consistent with their cultural grounding. Thus, in Iraq they would point out that (1) virtually all looters are men (in Middle Eastern cultures, women appear less in public); (2) they wear the same checked masks as the Palestinian fighters (a style distinctive to this part of the world); (3) they openly offer the looted objects for sale (practices common to a trading bazaar culture); and (4) the armed guards stand by (the demands of locality and possible kinship outweigh those of job description). In such an analysis, the social scientist takes no moral position on the activity in question but instead attempts to understand the behavior on its own cultural terms.

One might well respond to the distinction we have been setting between the traditional humanities and the social scientific approaches, saying, "Look, there are advantages to both points of view. In the case of radical Islam, for instance, to understand why some Muslims are eager to die for their religion, it helps to see that their adherents regard their religious beliefs as 'the best that has been thought and known' and thus extraordinarily valuable. At the same time, an understanding of the political and economic contexts—the links between religion on the one hand and Middle Eastern social structure on the other—is necessary to comprehend and explain the recurring explosions of sectarian violence. So, why not try to understand culture by approaching it from both directions?"

Why not, indeed? In this book, although our object is a specifically sociological understanding of culture, we try to incorporate the insights of both traditions. We begin to do so by envisioning the culture/society connection in terms of "cultural objects" located in a "cultural diamond."

Connections: The Links Between Culture and Society

We have been looking at various definitions of culture, from the most restrictive (high art; "the best that has been thought and known") to the most expansive (the totality of humanity's material and nonmaterial products). We have seen that the word and the concept, especially as employed in the social sciences, take many shapes and that, therefore, any discussion of culture must

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begin with a definition. Here, then, is our working definition: Culture refers to the expressive side of human life—in other words, to behavior, objects, and ideas that appear to express, or to stand for, something else. This is the case whether we are talking about explicit or implicit culture. Such a working definition is not evaluative or focused on "the best"; nor is it the most expansive definition, for it restricts culture to the meaningful.

Geertz, and Weber before him, took culture to involve meaning, and in this book, we follow their example. Thus, we could talk about a community in terms of its culture: its jokes and slang; its conventions, stereotypes, typical practices, and common knowledge; and its symbols that represent and guide the thinking, feeling, and behavior of its members. Or, we could talk about that community in terms of social structure: its network of relationships among members, its institutions, and its economic and political life. The community's culture influences its social structure, and vice versa; indeed, the two are intertwined and have been separated only for purposes of analysis. To understand the community, the sociologist must understand both.

We need to do more, however, than simply define culture and indicate how to distinguish it analytically from social structure. We need a way to conceptualize how culture and the social world come together or, in other words, how people in social contexts create meaning. To draw on both the humanities and social science views for our analysis of culture and to examine cultural phenomena and their relation to social life, we need a conceptual framework and conceptual tools, such as the cultural object.

The Cultural Object

A cultural object may be defined as shared significance embodied in form (Griswold 1986). In other words, it is a socially meaningful expression that is audible, visible, or tangible or that can be articulated. A cultural object, moreover, tells a story, and that story may be sung, told, set in stone, enacted, or painted on the body. Examples range widely. A religious doctrine, a YouTube video, a belief that women are more sensitive than men, a Shakespearean sonnet, a hairstyle such as Rastafarian dreadlocks or the Manchu queue, a habit of saying "God bless you" when somebody sneezes, or a quilt made by hand or by robots—any and all of these can be cultural objects. Each tells a story. Notice that the status of the cultural object results from an analytic decision that we make as observers; it is not built into the object itself. If we think of the quilt as a product in a department store's inventory or something to warm our feet in bed and not in terms of its meaning, the quilt is not a cultural object. But when we consider it in terms of its story—how it expresses women collectively piecing together

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scraps to produce an object of beauty and utility—the quilt becomes a meaningful cultural object and may be analyzed as such.

In this book, we talk equally of "cultural objects" and "culture," so it is important to keep the terms straight. Specifying a cultural object is a way of grasping some part of the broader system we refer to as culture and holding up that part for analysis. One might compare this distinction to how we would go about studying a marsh. We would need to analyze the soil, the water, the climate, and the specific forms of animal and plant life found there (e.g., the leopard frog) in order to understand how the ecosystem works as a whole. On the other hand, if we were primarily interested in a particular species of frog, our study would concentrate on it, with the marsh as a biological context. Analogizing to our terms, the cultural object is the leopard frog, and the culture is the marsh.

In attempting to understand the connections between a society and its culture, it seems to make sense to start the analysis with a close examination of cultural objects, those smaller parts of the interrelated, larger system. Here, we follow the lead of the humanities: Culture *is* in a world apart, at least for analytical purposes. Literary critics, art historians, and others in the humanities usually focus on a work of art as a self-referential universe possessing structure and meaning. This practice seems sound for examining cultural objects in our wider social sciences definition. We start, therefore, by paying close attention to the cultural object itself. This does not imply an "art for art's sake" (or culture for culture's sake) rejection of the external world and how it impinges on the cultural object but simply means we first take the cultural object as evidence about itself. In other words, we start with the cultural object, though we certainly don't end there.

Consider the homely case of bread. Plain old bread, traditionally the food of subsistence for people who can afford nothing better, has lately taken on a certain élan. Bakers in upscale communities have worked on improving the quality of American bread by introducing international baking techniques and new ingredients. Boutique bakeries have become so successful that they have forced industry giants such as Pepperidge Farm to compete on their level. Americans raised on plain white bread now munch on Italian focaccia, seven-grain pita, and sourdough baguettes that would amaze the French. New types of bread incorporating nine different stone-ground grains or hand-wrought into breadsticks receive fulsome tribute as being "first rate, handsomely crisp of crust and, yes, downright sexy" (Fabricant 1992). Bread, sexy?

Think of bread not simply as food or a commodity but as a cultural object. Americans and Europeans eat a lot of bread, but they don't pay a great deal of attention to it. Bread is basic, fundamental, at the foundation

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of the nutrition pyramid (yawn). Practical and boring though it may be, bread can be expressive as well. The post–World War II baby boom generation, for example, grew up on soft, spongy white bread like Wonder Bread. The "wonder" lay in the technology—Wonder Bread was infused with vitamins to "grow strong bodies in 12 ways"—and although it didn't have an especially memorable flavor, baby boomers who spread it with concoctions such as peanut butter and Marshmallow Fluff thought it tasted just fine. It seemed to express a child's view of the good life. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, that same baby boom generation rejected white bread, just as it rejected much else from mainstream American culture; defying the conventions they grew up with, these young people turned eating whole-grain bread into a political statement, one that expressed a repudiation of American capitalism, technology, and homogeneity.

Not only can bread be expressive; a moment's reflection reminds us that it is steeped in tradition. The Bible abounds in references to bread: It is the staff of life, it is unleavened during Passover, it is miraculously multiplied along with the fishes, and it should be cast upon the waters. In the Christian communion, it even embodies the Divine. During the first centuries of Islam, white bread symbolized a lack of discipline to the Arabs; a manuscript illustration shows a man enjoying a self-indulgent meal of roast kid, wine, and white bread (Tannahill 1973:173). In the European ethnic heritage that shaped many American institutions, bread connotes security, love, frugality, and family—even life itself.

We further recognize that bread, though ubiquitous in American kitchens, is by no means universal. Human beings eat different grains in different places: Many Chinese depend on rice, Senegalese on millet, and Mexicans on corn. In some of these countries, eating bread signifies being Westernized or modern, and it can become a political issue. In Nigeria, which enjoyed a period of oil-based wealth during the 1970s, the middle class developed a taste for bread made from imported flour and a distaste for local starches, such as yam and cassava. White bread connotes affluence and modernity for twentieth-century Nigerians just as it did for eighteenth-century Europeans. In the poorer "oil bust" years beginning in the 1980s, however, taxes on imports plus government advocacy of using locally produced foods attempted to shift Nigerian consumer tastes back to West African traditional starches. The battle has not been altogether successful, however, and the streets of Lagos teem with young hawkers of high-priced spongy white bread, something like our old friend Wonder Bread.

So, bread is basic, fundamental, and boring—but it is also biblically sanctioned, expressive, symbolic of European heritage or the good life, and even sexy. It is as much a part of a cultural system—whether we think of the local

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cultural system (the latest gustatory trends) or the global cultural system (the meaning of white bread in Nigeria)—as the more obviously "cultural" artifacts, such as television or ballet. Bread, then, is clearly a cultural object. Cultural objects compose part of a larger cultural system that we may want to analyze. How do the myriad components in this system mesh together? To look at the bigger picture of culture in society, we need one more analytical tool.

The Cultural Diamond

Cultural objects are made by human beings, a fact intrinsic to all of the various definitions—culture is "the best that has been thought and known" *by human beings* (Arnold); culture is the "meanings embodied in symbols" *through which human beings* communicate and pass on knowledge and attitudes (Geertz); culture is the externalization, objectification, and internalization *of human experience* (Berger)—and is the basis for the familiar distinction between culture and nature. Therefore, we may regard all cultural objects as having creators. These creators may be the people who first articulate and communicate an idea, the artists who fashion a form, or the inventors of a new game or new lingo. Any particular object may have a single creator, such as the author of a novel, or multiple creators, such as all of the people listed in the credits at the beginning of a movie.

Other people besides their creators experience cultural objects, of course. If a poet sings her odes in the wilderness with no one to hear or record, if a hermit invents a revolutionary new theology but keeps it to himself, if a radio program is broadcast but a technical malfunction prevents anyone from hearing it, these present potential but not actual cultural objects. Only when such objects become public, when they enter the circuit of human discourse, do they enter the culture and become cultural objects. Therefore, all cultural objects must have people who receive them, people who hear, read, understand, think about, enact, participate in, and remember them. We might call these people the object's audience, although that term is a bit misleading; the people who actually experience the object may differ from the intended or original audience, and far from being a passive audience, cultural receivers are active meaning makers.

Both cultural objects and the people who create and receive them are not floating freely but are anchored in a particular context. We can call this the social world, by which we mean the economic, political, social, and cultural patterns and exigencies that occur at any particular point in time. Cultural sociology centers, first and foremost, on the relationship between cultural objects and the social world. This even-handed attention to both the

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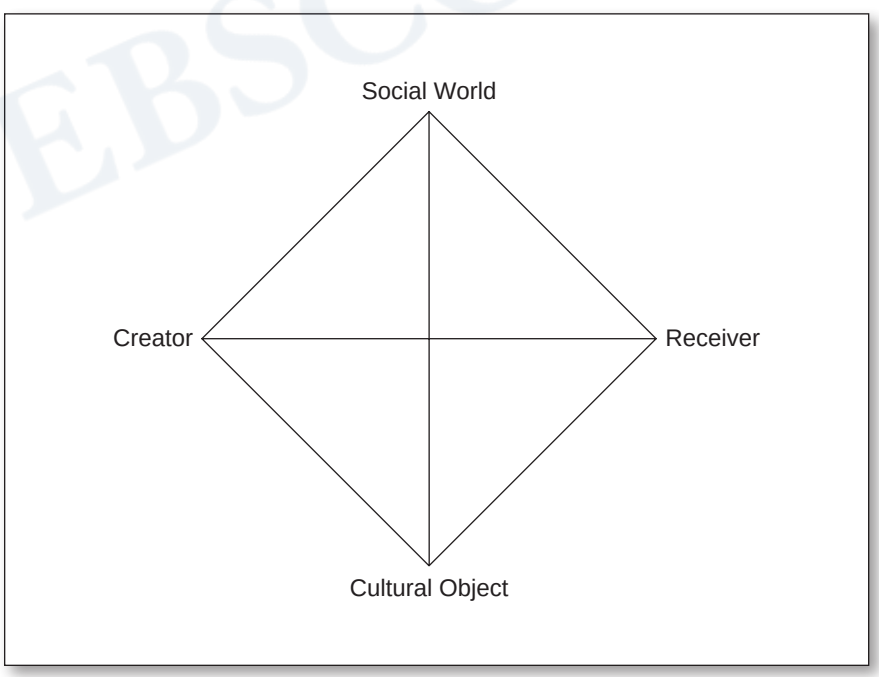
cultural and the social is one of the things that differentiate cultural sociology from cultural studies, which focuses more heavily on the cultural side. A second difference is methodological: cultural sociology, as a social science, depends more heavily on empirical methods and the analysis of evidence, whereas cultural studies is more purely interpretive. That said, there is considerable overlap between the two fields. (A good discussion of this distinction is in Inglis, Blaikie, and Wagner-Pacifici (2007).

We have identified four elements: creators, cultural objects, recipients, and the social world. Let us first arrange these four in the shape of a diamond and then draw a line connecting each element to every other one. Doing this creates what I call a cultural diamond (a diamond in the two-dimensional sense of a baseball diamond), which looks like Figure 1.1.

Our cultural diamond features four points and six links. We cannot call it a *theory* of culture, because it says nothing about how the points relate. Nor can we call it a *model* of culture in the strict sense, because it does not indicate cause and effect; in the cultural diamond, violence in the popular culture (e.g., gangsta rap) could be seen as "causing" violence in the social world, but the reverse could equally be the case. Instead, the

Figure 1.1 The Cultural Diamond



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cultural diamond is an accounting device intended to encourage a fuller understanding of any cultural object's relationship to the social world. It does not say what the relationship between any of the points should be, only that there *is* a relationship. Moreover, the texture of that relationship lies as much in the links as in the four points.

Therefore, a complete understanding of a given cultural object requires understanding all four points and six links. Return to the example of bread, a cultural object of widespread but not universal meaningfulness. To understand bread in West Hollywood and Lagos, we would have to know about the producers (the growers, bakers, importers, trendsetting chefs and restaurant owners, and government bureaucrats setting import controls) and the consumers (the population and its demographic characteristics—how many children pack lunches, how many working couples eat out, how an aging and increasingly thrifty population gratifies its tastes for luxury, and how the African public has come to associate white bread with prosperity). We would need to understand linkages—the media connections advertising products to consumers, for example, or the system of distribution whereby Nigerian teenage boys acquire fresh bread to hawk on the highways. Only after investigating such points and connections can we feel confident that we understand the relationship—a specifically cultural relationship—that exists between bread and the society in which it is made and eaten. In Carey's (1989) terms, we end up understanding bread not as the transmission of a foodstuff but as a ritual that can bind or sometimes divide people.

The same proves true for any aspect of culture that we isolate and analyze as a cultural object: We need to identify the characteristics of the object and how it is like some other objects in the culture and unlike others. We need to consider who created (made, formed, said) it and who received (heard, saw, believed) it. We need to think about the various linkages; for example, on the social world/creator link, how in this society do some types of people get to create this type of cultural object and others do not? (For example, think about how women have often been excluded from creating certain kinds of cultural objects.) On the cultural object/audience link, how do some cultural objects reach an audience and others do not? (For example, think about all of the poems that never get published or all of the plays that never get produced.) Once we understand the specific points and links in the diamond, we can say that we have a sociological understanding of that cultural object. Moreover, once we sense how that cultural object fits into its context, we are on our way to understanding the culture as a whole.

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SUMMARY

In this chapter, we learned the variety of uses for the term *culture* and how the term applies to ephemeral, even trivial, aspects of experience and to deeply held values for which people are willing to die. We compared the humanities' approach to culture with that of the social sciences and suggested that a full understanding of the relationship between culture and society must employ the insights of both perspectives. We suggested an approach to the sociological analysis of culture that uses the conceptual tools of the cultural object and the cultural diamond as a schema for organizing our thinking and investigation.

In the following chapters, we apply the cultural diamond schema to the complex web of connections between cultures and societies. The chapters are organized following the diamond: In Chapter 2, we concentrate on the meanings found in cultural objects (the social world/cultural object link); in Chapter 3, we examine creators of cultural objects (the diamond's left point); and in Chapter 4, we focus on systems of production (the links between creators, receivers, and cultural objects) and receivers or audiences themselves (the right point). In Chapters 5 and 6, we turn to two applications of sociologically informed cultural analysis: social problems and organizational transactions. In Chapter 7, we look at culture and politics, and in Chapter 8 we consider the relationship of culture and community in the global, postmodern, wired world of the new millennium.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Find an example of the word *culture* used in a magazine or newspaper. What are the cultural objects at issue? Is the writer using an implicit definition of culture more in line with the traditional humanities approach or the social science approach? What are the consequences of this definition for what the text is saying, and how would the message vary with a different definition?

2. Ask your friends and family what culture means to them. What are the significant similarities and differences in their understanding(s) of the word? Does age, gender, race, class, or place of residence shape their answers?

3. The cultural diamond was developed for the analysis of cultural objects such as works of literature or art. How well does it work for other types of objects such as religious beliefs, laws, customs, or rituals? Think of an example of such a cultural object; how could you apply the diamond? What insights might be gained from this type of analysis?

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RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING

Grazian, David. 2010. *Mix It Up: Popular Culture, Mass Media, and Society*. New York: Norton. Grazian takes a lively yet intellectually sophisticated look at the cultural world we live in, especially the urban, young, media-saturated world. His analyses of twenty-first century popular culture will provoke both debate and a surge of new examples of the sociological principles they illustrate.

Spillman, Lyn, ed. 2002. *Cultural Sociology*. Malden, MA, & Oxford, UK: Blackwell. This wide-ranging reader offers samples of some of the most important theoretical statements and empirical work in the field.

Williams, Raymond. 1976. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press. A Marxian literary critic, Williams gives the history of a number of terms that are important in the social sciences, including *culture*, and shows how such terms are by no means innocent of class-based assumptions.

The following are three books on the relationship between culture and community. You might read any of these with such questions in mind as "What has shaped the culture of this particular community?" and "What impact does this community's culture have on its residents?"

Anderson, Elijah. 2011. *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life*. New York: Norton. Anderson offers a vivid and sociologically penetrating ethnographic tour of Center City, Philadelphia, and the public spaces—zones the streetwise urbanites recognize to be under a "cosmopolitan canopy"—where different races mingle under a (temporary and fragile) respite from racial tensions.

Bell, Michael Mayerfield. 1995. *Childerley: Nature and Morality in a Country Village*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Bell dissected the culture of an English village, whose residents work actively and self-consciously to maintain their rural culture even as they get drawn into the urban economy.

Klinenberg, Eric. 2002. *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Klinenberg compared two Chicago neighborhoods' responses to a heat wave, showing that despite their comparable poverty, one had a robust culture that enabled its residents to care for each other during a crisis while the other did not.

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2

Cultural Meaning

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."
The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."
And they said then, "But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,
A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are."

(Stevens [1936] 1954:165)

Wallace Stevens, a Connecticut insurance executive who also happened to be one of the most important American poets of the twentieth century, wrote "The Man With the Blue Guitar" as a commentary on the ambiguous relationship between poetry and what most people regard as the "real world." What he said about poetry applies more generally to culture and cultural objects. We sense that culture is "beyond us, yet ourselves," and we look for a simple relationship between cultural objects and "things exactly as they are." But no simple relationship exists, for when something becomes a cultural object—when, as it were, it is played upon the blue guitar—that something indeed changes. And the change involves meaning.

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By definition, a cultural object has shared significance; it has been given a meaning shared by members of the culture. In the aggregate, as Geertz's (1973) definition in Chapter 1 emphasizes, a culture comprises a "pattern of meanings" passed down over time. Meaning or significance (we use the two terms interchangeably) refers to the object's capacity—in addition to whatever practical or direct properties it may possess—to suggest or point to something else. Thus, the sound of a fire alarm "means" that everyone should clear the building, or an A on a test "means" that the student has mastered the material. Each of the stories that opened Chapter 1 is a parable about meaning. The Japanese businessman attached personal honor to his business card, whereas the same card meant nothing to the American beyond its practical function. A schoolgirl's veil means modesty to local Muslims, but it means a religious intrusion into the secular state's domain to non-Muslim French. Dogs, though significant cultural objects to both middle-class whites and working-class blacks in the neighborhood Anderson (1990) studied, meant different things to each group.

We can identify two types of meaning: simple and complex. Simple meaning denotes one-to-one correspondence. We express this type of meaning when we talk about signs and what they stand for. Algebra uses signs in this manner; in the equation $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ we know that *a* "means" the length of one leg of a right triangle, *b* "means" the length of the other leg, and *c* "means" the length of the hypotenuse. Likewise, a flashing red light "means" stop and then go. All of these signs have a single referent.

Look for complex meaning in the signs typically called symbols. Rather than standing for a single referent, symbols evoke a variety of meanings, some of which may be ambiguous. Symbols do not denote; they connote, suggest, or imply. They evoke powerful emotions—think how many people have died for a flag—and can often both unite and disrupt social groups. A few years ago, for example, a Christian student association erected a giant cross at the University of Ibadan, the most prestigious university in Nigeria. Now, the cross symbol draws up a variety of deep-seated images, attitudes, and beliefs in Christians. This cross, however, happened to cast a long shadow over the Islamic student mosque in the afternoon sun. To the Muslim students, this accident of position symbolized the (literal) overshadowing of Islam by Christianity, an implied meaning they vehemently rejected. They retaliated by building a wall symbolizing their Islamic religious pride that blocked the shadow.

Because of its complexity, culture comprises complex rather than simple meanings, or meanings "embodied in symbols," to continue with Geertz's definition. To understand culture, we must be able to unravel these tangled webs of meanings. In other words, we must be able to analyze the relationship

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that may exist between a symbol, the "tune upon the blue guitar" on the one hand, and "things exactly as they are" on the other. This relationship, of course, can prove highly personal and individual, as when a psychoanalyst analyzes a patient's dreams for their symbolic content. The sociology of culture, however, looks for social meanings. And in our cultural diamond, meaning links cultural objects with the social world.

In this chapter, we consider why the need for meaning is fundamental to human existence. We then consider an influential theoretical model that suggests that cultural meaning comes from culture's capacity to mirror social life. We investigate the classical roots of this "reflection" model and two contemporary sociological versions of it: functionalist and Marxist cultural theories. Then, we look at Max Weber's striking reversal of the mirror model in his assertion that the social world actually reflects culture, not the other way around. We look at some contemporary sociological applications of reflection theory. Finally, we consider the "clash of civilizations" debate, in which some see different meaning systems as constituting a global threat.

Why Do We Need Meaning?

We all know that living beings grow and act according to instructions encoded in their genes. In animals, we call this genetic prompting of behavior instinct; for example, a hare instinctively knows to run from the scent of a fox but not from the scent of a chipmunk. Most of what animals do and know is genetically given—hardwired, so to speak. Human beings differ. In the first place, they are physiologically incomplete at birth. The large size of the human head requires a baby's birth to occur before all of its internal systems fully develop; some say that human "life" independent of the mother doesn't really begin until the child turns several months old. More to the point, human genetic encodings do not provide sufficient information for survival. A kitten, once weaned, could survive in the woods without other members of its species to show it what to do, but a one-year-old child could not. Humans must learn to live. And learning in humans is a social process of interaction and socialization whereby culture is transmitted.

Anthropologists stress how the total of such human interactions transmits patterns of meanings and behaviors and that these patterns are called culture. Consider Geertz's (1973:45–46) summary of how human culture compensates for genetic incompleteness:

> Man is so in need of . . . symbolic sources of illumination to find his bearings in the world because the nonsymbolic sort that are constitutionally ingrained

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> in his body cast so diffused a light. The behavior patterns of lower animals are, at least to a much greater extent, given to them with their physical structure; genetic sources of information order their actions within much narrower ranges of variation, the narrower and more thoroughgoing the lower the animal. For man, what are innately given are extremely general response capacities. . . . Undirected by culture patterns—organized systems of significant symbols—man's behavior would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless. Culture, the accumulated totality of such patterns, is not just an ornament of human existence but . . . an essential condition for it.

Peter Berger (1969) suggested, along similar lines, the ultimate human terror as not evil but chaos. A total absence of order, a world without structure or meaning, is so horrifying as to be unthinkable. As a bulwark against chaos, human beings create cultures through the externalization/objectification/internalization process we examined earlier, thereby constructing the worlds in which they operate. Ideals of order and stability—under Communism, capitalism, autocracies, liberal democracies—dominated the twentieth century, and ongoing fluctuations and upheavals may be dominating the twenty-first in a condition Zygmunt Bauman has memorably called "liquid modernity" (2000). The "Arab Spring" and its aftermath exemplify this new fluidity to which cultural meaning systems must respond.

Thus, the sociological analysis of culture begins at the premise that culture provides orientation, wards off chaos, and directs behavior toward certain lines of action and away from others. Culture provides meaning and order through the use of symbols, whereby certain things designated as cultural objects are endowed with significance over and above their material utility. We can most easily see this in the case of tangible or visible objects—business cards, dogs, or works of art—but the same holds true for ideas or bits of behavior. The attributes of a desirable husband, for example, or the social script in which a young woman looks at a man, lowers her eyes for a moment, and then looks at him again describe cultural objects that carry meaning. Some cultures—rural Italy perhaps—would consider the aforementioned young woman's behavior appropriate; others would see a coy, irritating display of pseudo-innocence; still others would consider it immodest and even whorish. Likewise, in West African cultures, such as that of the Yoruba, patterned facial scars mean that a man's kinship affiliations make him either desirable or off-limits as a suitor. Other societies would consider these scars either irrelevant or disfiguring. Neither scars nor lowering the eyes has meaning in and of itself, but both become intensely meaningful insofar as they are embedded in a culture that produces or interprets them.

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Culture and Meaning in Reflection Theory

If culture involves meanings, and if meanings are social, again we must ask: What types of relationships exist between the social world and cultural objects or patterns? The basic questions include "Where does meaning come from?" and "What difference do meanings make?" Two of the most important sociological answers to these questions—those provided by functionalism and Marxism—we can consider versions of reflection theory, whereby culture is seen as a faithful reflection of social life. The third answer, offered by Max Weber, emphasizes the degree to which social life reflects culture. We need to take a careful look at the whole idea of reflection and the implications of this model for how we think about culture. We start by considering the background of the reflection model in classical Greek thought. Equipped with this background, we explore the forms that reflection theory takes in functionalism, Marxism, and Weberian analysis.

Culture as Mirror

The assumption behind the idea of culture as reflection is a simple one: Culture mirrors social reality. Therefore, the meaning of a particular cultural object lies in the social structures and social patterns it reflects. The sociologically informed analyst, it follows, should look for direct, one-to-one correspondences between culture and society.

The reflection model has much to recommend it, including common sense. Most people believe, for example, that the violence and mayhem depicted on television reflect the violence and mayhem in our society. Without denying that television violence may itself contribute to social violence, these simply present two different connections on the cultural diamond that may or may not vary together but that are conceptually distinct, as indicated in Figure 2.1. In one conceptualization, television violence reflects the social world; in the other, the social world reflects television violence. Traditionally, cultural sociology prefers the former way of describing the connection, asking how culture reflects society and admitting the latter way—how society reflects culture—only as a secondary consideration.

Putting this simple reflection model on our cultural diamond, as in Figure 2.1, shows how we might go about testing common beliefs about the connection between television and violence. If the question is "Does television reflect changes in the social world?" we would measure incidents of violence in a given society at some starting point (T1) until some later point (T2). We similarly would measure changes in violent episodes on television

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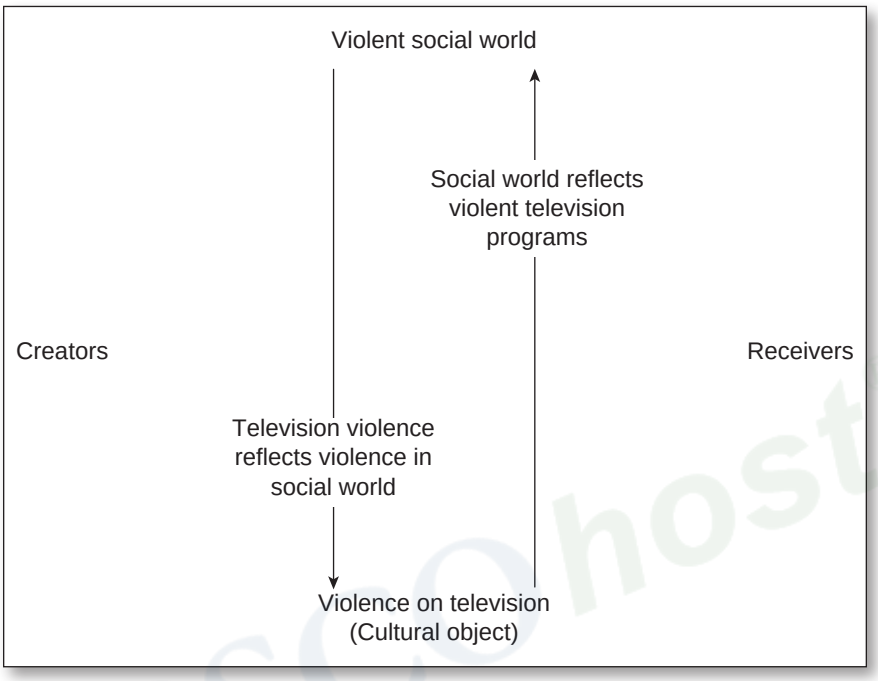
Figure 2.1 Reflection Model of Television and Violence



over the same time. We would expect, following reflection theory, that television violence, allowing for a certain time lag, would rise and fall along with the rates of real-life violence. That does not mean social violence *causes* television violence, only that the two correlate. If, on the other hand, the two rates rise and fall together but the ups and downs in television violence *precede* corresponding changes in the rate of social violence, this would support the social-world-reflects-culture argument.

Besides, according with our common-sense observations of the way the world works, reflection theory gains credibility from the fact that artists, writers, and other cultural creators often describe their creativity in these terms. As the nineteenth-century French writer Stendhal responded to critics who accused him of portraying sordid materials ([1830] 1958:363),

> A novel, gentlemen, is a mirror carried along a highway. Sometimes it reflects to your view the azure of the sky, sometimes the mire of the puddles in the road. And the man who carries the mirror on his back will be accused by you of immorality! His mirror shows the mire and you blame the mirror!

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As well as both a great deal of plausibility and the endorsement of modern culture creators, reflection theories of culture also have a long history. Like so much else, they go back to Plato. A brief review of the history of the reflection model will show how certain assumptions about the relationship between culture and the "real world" entered into sociological models.

The Greek Background to Reflection Theory

We begin our consideration of the classical origins of reflection theory with Plato (ca. 430–347 BC), Athenian philosopher and student of Socrates. According to Plato's theory of forms, advanced in book 10 of the *Republic,* behind all appearances lies an idea or a form. For example, although we sleep on a physical bed, the physical piece of furniture is mere appearance. Reality is a preexisting form, bed. The physical bed reflects this ideal bed, although imperfectly. Human beings, however, confuse appearance for reality, just as when people in a cave take as reality the flickering shadows a fire throws on the wall.

Even appearances come from somewhere, and Plato suggested that they come from reflection. He asked, How could someone—a cultural creator, we would say—make all of the works of the universe, all of nature, all of the heavens, and all of the gods? "Impossible," said a student, but Plato replied:

> There are many ways in which the feat might be quickly and easily accomplished, none quicker than that of turning a *mirror* round and round—you would soon enough make the sun and the heavens, and the earth and yourself, and other animals and plants, and all the other things of which we were just now speaking, in the mirror.

Plato thus envisioned three types of creators: (1) God, the creative being, who makes the one real bed in its ideal form, (2) the carpenter who makes a physical bed, and (3) the painter who makes a picture of the physical bed. Thus, art, such as that produced by the painter, is an imperfect copy of an imperfect copy. All art—hence all mimesis or imitation—is a long way from truth; the artist can imitate so many things because he or she only superficially understands any of them. Plato views human life as a pilgrimage from appearance to reality. Art presents an obstacle to this journey because it seduces people into a mistaken understanding of the real.

Note some features of this argument: Plato links his objection to art based on the theory of forms with his objection based on the educational

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function of culture. Of course, the two need not go together. As we have seen, Matthew Arnold made the liberal argument that art, like all culture, widens experience, thus making people more sensitive and selective. Notice as well the religious basis of Plato's objections. Good art does not imitate divine patterns but participates in them. This view compares to the Islamic injunction against representing humans or animals; according to Islamic aesthetic theory, art should not compete with Allah's creation. Such religious objections to the representation of living things are common, as in the Judeo-Christian second commandment: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exod. 21:4 [RSV]).

Thus, Plato's theory of forms contains three components: the form, the appearance, and the art. Translating into our terminology, we could say that the idea, the material embodiment of the idea, and the symbolic or cultural expression of the idea form a double-diamond, as in Figure 2.2. However, the consequence of this three-part structure, for Plato, downgraded the third term as doubly removed from reality.

Aristotle (384–322 BC), a younger contemporary of Plato and a member of his academy, suggested a way to defend art (and, by extension, culture): Redefine the middle term. He argued that art imitates not the ideal realm but universal truths about human existence. Aristotle's redefinition—art imitates the universals of nature—changed the very meaning of mimesis. Aristotle's universalism provides the basis for Matthew Arnold's "best that has been thought and known" (and indeed for much of humanist thinking), for one of the distinguishing characteristics of "the best" is its broad range of applicability.

Reflection theory in its Platonic origins implies that culture is less than real or less fundamental than what it reflects, and this implication carries over into the discipline of sociology. So do the more positive Aristotelian twists of this theory—that culture is somehow more profound than the social world and that culture can represent human universals. The two dominant sociological theories of the twentieth century—functionalism and Marxism—both employ the reflection model, and both perpetuate some of its Platonic implications. Both also exhibit the "close-fit assumption" between culture and society that we earlier described as characteristic of social science theories of culture in general. Now, we see where this idea comes from: If one entity "reflects" another, it must match that other entity very closely. Let us examine the cultural implications of these two sociological theories, seeking both the strengths and the deficiencies of their versions of the reflection model.

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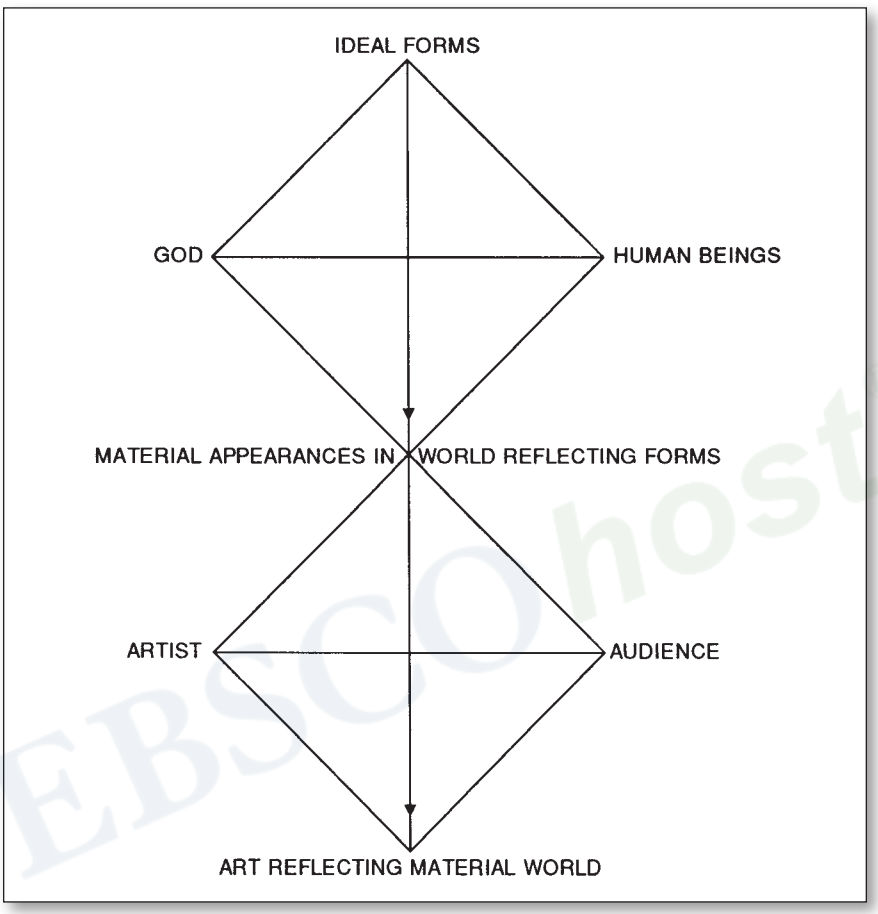
Figure 2.2 Plato's Reflection Theory Set on the Cultural Diamond



Culture and Meaning in Marxian Sociology

Like all social theorists, Karl Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels responded to the intellectual and social currents of their own day, the mid-nineteenth century. In their early writings about culture—and Marx produced his cultural analysis mostly in the early part of his career, before he turned his attention more exclusively to economics—Marx and Engels engaged in the philosophical debate between idealism and materialism. We already met idealism in the Platonic version. Now, we take a look at the debate as it appeared some 2,000 years after Plato, when Marx was a young man.

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"From Earth to Heaven": The Materialist Approach to Culture

As we have seen, the basic premise of idealism is that we can best understand culture as the embodiment of ideas, spirit, beauty, and universal truth. As such, culture is separate and autonomous from material or earthly existence. The late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century thinkers known as the German Idealists shared the neo-Platonic sense of the spirit, the idea, and the intellectual category as antecedent to sensuous empirical reality. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), for example, argued that the human mind could receive and respond to the external world only because the mind possessed concepts such as time and space before experiencing them empirically. G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) made idealism into a principle of world history. Hegel postulated a World Spirit that moved toward fulfillment at the end of history. Every age, he said, had a unitary character because its culture, politics, and historical events all manifested the World Spirit at a given stage of development. Why do things change? Hegel maintained that history moves through conflicts between irreconcilable forces. During some periods, one force dominates (the thesis), but its domination breeds new crises (the antithesis), and eventually a new force that reconciles the old thesis and antithesis (the synthesis) overthrows and replaces the dominant ideas and forces. This synthesis becomes the new thesis, breeds conflicts, and so on; history moves on through stages in a series of revolutions.

If idealism gives the ideal precedence over the material, materialism reverses the relationship. Karl Marx (1818–1883) encountered materialist thought in 1836, when, at the age of eighteen, he came to the University of Berlin (from which he received a doctorate in post-Aristotelian Greek philosophy in 1841) and became involved with the Young Hegelians, a group concerned with turning Hegelian philosophy to more progressive ends. Critical social thinkers, they wanted to expose laws of history in order to reform society; thus, they were "idealists" in the everyday sense of the term, as well as in the philosophical sense.

After finishing his degree and realizing that a university career would be impossible for him in Prussia, Marx left Berlin for Cologne, where he edited a radical journal. In this capacity, he received a book from a materialist philosopher named Ludwig Feuerbach that dramatically changed his thinking and caused him to break with the Young Hegelians. Reversing Hegel, Feuerbach argued that material conditions produced the spirit of the age. His prime example: religion. Human beings create gods, Feuerbach contended, but then they take their own creation as real, worship it, and become dependent on it. Religion, although created by people, becomes separated

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from them, coming to serve as an idealized compensation for real human misery. (Marx would echo this sentiment in his later notorious comment: "Religion . . . is the opium of the people.")

The materialist view for cultural sociology implies that religion, values, art, ideas, laws, and culture in general are the products of material reality and that we should analyze them as such. As Marx put it, materialists assume the direction of causality as from earth to heaven, not from heaven to earth. Cultural research, consequently, should move in the same direction.

Historical Materialism

Profoundly influenced by Feuerbach's materialism, Marx soon became impatient with what he considered its ignoring of history, and he finally came to the conclusion that Feuerbach was as much of an ivory-tower philosopher as the idealists themselves. It is not enough simply to point out the material basis of illusions, Marx contended in *The German Ideology* (1970). That's like saying "Gravity is just an illusion" to a man falling from a tall building or, in Marx's scornful words, like "fighting phrases with phrases."

Feuerbach didn't see, in Marx's view, the social and historical roots of the material world. This recognition led to what is known as Marx's historical materialism. A cherry tree, for example, looks solid, a material "given." Yet Marx pointed out that the cherry tree had been brought to Europe from Asia through trade. It wasn't just "there" but had a specific and lengthy history as a product of human labor. Under the terms of historical materialism, any analysis always started from *homo faber* (man the maker), humans working to sustain themselves through production and reproduction.

Not only material things such as trees but also consciousness itself is a social product, Marx argued, a truth that applies to all we think of as culture. Marx claimed that culture, government, religion, politics, and laws are all "superstructure" resting on a base of the material forces of production and their economic foundations. Changes in the base, it follows, bring about changes in superstructure. Marx succinctly put forth this argument in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1977:389):

> In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of

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> production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

Marx argued that we must make a distinction between material economic conditions of production and ideological forms. In other words, he said, don't judge a period of transformation (or any other period) by its own consciousness, by what people living in the period think and believe, but instead explain the period's consciousness by the contradictions in its material life. The critical analyst should investigate the social origins of the values or "spirit" of the era.

In this investigation, class interests and antagonisms are the key. As Marx memorably put it, a society's ruling ideas equal the ideas of its ruling class. These ideas and values and cultural practices protect their interests and legitimate their position. The ruling class always seeks to justify its preeminent position by making its ideas seem universal. But does Marx's theory mean that culture—ideas, values, arts, laws, religion, and popular culture—is determined inexorably by a society's material life and the related class antagonisms? It sounds that way, but some contend that Marx did not envision a simple determinism. Raymond Williams ([1973] 1980), a Marxian cultural analyst, suggested that Marx's "determination" doesn't mean "totally predict" but "setting limits, exerting pressures." Economic conditions influence, but do not strictly determine, cultural practices.

Marxian theory made the sociological analysis of culture possible by hypothesizing the nature of the linkages between society and culture, the causal direction, and the principles of the relationship between the two. Like all reflection theories, it simplifies the connections indicated by the cultural diamond, but it offers a substantial theoretical justification for this simplification. Marx's historical materialism gave rise to a rich tradition of cultural research that continues to influence how sociologists think about culture. Let's examine this research with an eye for the useful in understanding culture today.

Research Directions From the Marxian Tradition

Marxist research always entails a social critique and implicitly or explicitly advocates change. Because cultural objects either enhance or obstruct the understanding of social relations, potentially cultural objects fit among the "weapons of criticism" Marx called for and thus can facilitate the historical movement toward socialist revolution. Indeed, this provided the key aesthetic criterion for politically committed Marxists.

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An especially influential group of thinkers, the associates of the Frankfurt school, applied Marxian cultural analysis. Their background lay in the post–World War I dilemma facing German Marxists: Should they follow Moscow, support the Weimar Republic, or reexamine Marxist theory? The Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt was set up to follow the last of these options. Here assembled Marxist scholars, most from Jewish families, who sought to reconcile their Marxism with the contemporary world. After the Nazis came to power, most of these Frankfurt school associates escaped from Germany, and many moved to Columbia University in the mid-1930s. Max Horkheimer headed this scholarly community, which also included Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and Leo Löwenthal.

Members of the Frankfurt school advanced a new critical theory, which organized empirical cultural analysis around a goal of social reformation. In this spirit, they did a great deal of research on authority and mass culture, seeing both as related to the growing helplessness of people in modern society. They criticized mass cultural products as having become mere commodities that discouraged social protest by making consumers reconciled to their existence. In mounting this critique, the Frankfurt school used the term *culture industry* to stress the antidemocratic nature of popular culture.

In an interesting example of Marxian cultural analysis, Leo Löwenthal ([1944] 1968) compared biographies of notable Americans found in popular magazines published early in the twentieth century with biographies that appeared in the same magazines during the 1940s and found dramatic changes. The early biographies usually described inventors, discoverers, or business entrepreneurs, whereas those of the later period more likely described movie stars, sports figures, and other entertainers. Löwenthal concluded that this change reflected a shift from an economy based on production to one that emphasized consumption and leisure. A related shift had occurred in the amount of detail the biographies contained. Whereas the earlier ones characterized their subjects as extraordinary, later biographies talked about the ordinary lives of their subjects, including information about the brand of cigarettes the movie star smoked or the type of car the baseball player drove. This, too, reflected the shift from production to consumption values that took place during the century, as small-scale business gave way to giant corporations. Löwenthal concluded that the working-class and middle-class readers no longer believed in the Horatio Alger myth that the early biographies offered. (J. Gamson [1994] offers a contemporary version of how America conceptualizes its celebrities.)

Music provides another example of the radical critique of popular culture. Theodor Adorno attacked radio music, produced and distributed by the culture industry, with the charge that popular music on the radio, including jazz,

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is mere repetition that leads its audience to delight in recognition of the familiar, not the challenge of the new. Psychologically, this results in a childlike regression rather than an intellectual awakening. This line of reasoning typified the Frankfurt school concerns. They ultimately feared that people would become too stupefied by the mass media to protest, or even notice, when their freedoms disappeared.

Meanwhile, in the mid-twentieth century, another theory—functionalism—was proving enormously influential in the sociology of culture and elsewhere. It retained the mirror model of culture while offering a comprehensive account of human social relations. If Marxism views human social life as a bitter struggle to the death, functionalism views it as a systemic tendency toward harmony. We now need to look at functionalism, so different from Marxist theory yet sharing the reflection model, to see its impact on cultural studies.

Culture and Meaning in Functionalist Sociology

Aristotle's suggestion that culture tells about the kind of thing that happens to human beings may be restated in terms specific to a given society. Thus, the culture of the Egyptians tells us about the kinds of things that happen in Egypt, thereby indicating the way Egyptians view their social and natural worlds. In this modified Aristotelian form, reflection theory becomes, for two reasons, a very attractive model for the sociological understanding of culture. First, the idea that "culture reflects society (or social structure)" provides a model of the connection between culture and society and suggests the primary direction of influence. Second, this model allows for the use of culture as social evidence.

Both attributes are part and parcel of the functionalist image of a close fit between culture and social structure, at least in a society that functions properly. The essence of functionalism is that human societies, to maintain themselves, have concrete needs, and social institutions arise to meet these needs. For example, every society needs to rear and socialize its young, so every society has some regular, institutionalized patterned relationships, called families, that perform this function. A healthy society exists in a state of balance or equilibrium in which institutions adapt to one another and operate in a system of mutual interdependence to meet the needs of the society. Failures of fit, which all societies experience to some extent, are described as dysfunctional. It follows from this thinking that every social level—the culture, the polity, the economy, and the social order—provides input to and receives output from every other level. Every level adapts to, or reflects, every other level. Thus, culture reflects society just as society reflects culture.

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Problems with this simple functionalist version of reflection theory become obvious when we think of specific examples, such as the degree to which popular television shows "reflect" social reality. What about human beings, we might ask, the creators and audiences, and the other points of the cultural diamond? The classic functionalist reflection model assumes that these human beings are passive and without interests of their own. In addition, the model does not have a place for the independent influence of the organizations of cultural production, the record companies, church hierarchies, symphonies, art galleries, and so forth.

Even the mirror metaphor is less straightforward than it first appears. From the audience's point of view, for example, is a cultural work a mirror of itself or a window into other people? Here, we recall Peter Berger's (1969) point that the same person does not necessarily perform the acts of externalization and internalization. And what about the passage of time? The transience of the mirror image seems to conflict with the real permanence many cultural works have shown, a permanence the humanities have suggested as especially significant.

Moreover, the "social evidence" point—the idea that we can read a society directly through its cultural works—often misleads. We all know, for example, that *Father Knows Best* and other family sitcoms of the 1950s offer a highly skewed portrait of actual American family life during that decade. Cultural objects often idealize certain aspects of social experience, or they emphasize less favorable aspects as a form of social criticism. Or, as Plato recognized, they feature the sensational; few people would suggest that the sexual and criminal shenanigans on the average reality show "reflect" the way contemporary people really live.

So the pure mirror model, in which social structure and culture adapt to one another and serve each other's functional needs, seems a bit hard to swallow. More complex functionalist reflection models do exist, however, and they satisfy some of the objections raised here. To take one effective study, art historian Michael Baxandall (1972) suggests a way for the basic reflection model to represent all of the points and links of the cultural diamond. In his study of fifteenth-century Italian paintings, Baxandall shows how the paintings reflect

1. *commercial transactions*. The contract between a painter and his client—the contract would be the horizontal line on our diamond—stipulated the amount of expensive pigments, the extent of gilding, and the proportion of the work that the master, as opposed to his students, painted.

2. *changing values*. During the century, the emphasis in the paintings—and what the client was willing to pay for—shifted from pigments to pictorial

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skill. This reflected changing consumption styles among wealth—specifically a new concern with taste instead of a simple display of wealth—but still reflected class position.

3. *the "period eye."* This is to the cognitive capacity and style of an era. For example, Baxandall notes the large number of containers, cylinders, and piles of grain or other goods in the paintings. He suggests that these appealed to the knowledge and skills of wealthy merchants, who had to develop great facility at gauging volumes because no standard weights and measures existed at this time. Such merchants were often the painters' clients. Note that Baxandall gives us a highly sociological definition of *taste,* the conformity between the discriminations of painters and viewers. "If a painting gives us opportunity for exercising a valued skill and rewards our virtuosity with a sense of worthwhile insights about that painting's organization, we tend to enjoy it: it is to our taste" (34).

In this reflection argument, culture is not a direct reflection of the social world but rather is mediated through the minds of human beings. Renaissance Italian paintings reflect the social experience that produced a certain way of seeing things, a period eye composed of a "stock of patterns, categories and methods of inference; training in a range of representational conventions; and experience drawn from the environment, in what are plausible ways of visualizing what we have incomplete information about" (Baxandall 1972:32). And not only the general social experience of fifteenth-century Italians is reflected but also that of the specific class of men—and they were virtually all men—who produced and bought the paintings. At the same time, the analysis is recognizably functionalist (although as an art historian, Baxandall probably would not use the term). From the position of social structure, the rising merchant class requires a way to demonstrate its wealth and indicate its participation in aristocratic patterns of behavior such as art patronage. From the position of culture, painters require buyers who understand and approve of what they see. The merchants and the paintings, respectively representing social structure and culture here, functionally adapted to one another.

Although a complex reflection model proves more satisfactory than the simple culture-reflects-society view, questions remain. How do cultural works maintain effectiveness over space and time? Twentieth-century people don't have a fifteenth-century period eye yet still respond to the art of the Italian Renaissance. Somehow, we must create new meanings independent from the original period eye, and the reflection model does not help us understand where these come from. Another question asks, "Why are some

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'realities' reflected and not others?" Culture is clearly selective in the way that mirrors are not. Reservations about the mirror metaphor, especially in its functionalist version, have led some people to suggest that culture is more a reflection "on" than a reflection "of." Through culture, in other words, human beings may reflect on their individual and social experience.

Let us pause here to review our path. At the opening of this chapter, we saw how culture provides the meanings that human beings find essential. It therefore followed that a sociological understanding of culture would attempt to connect cultural meanings with the social world. A standard approach, rooted in Platonic and Aristotelian cultural theory, is to envision culture as reflecting the social world. Both functionalist and Marxist theories of culture employ the reflection model. Now we look at a quite different analysis of cultural meaning whose effect reverses the direction of reflection: the cultural theory of Max Weber.

Culture and Meaning in Weberian Sociology

Both the functionalist and the Marxian version of reflection theory recognize that culture and social structure exert mutual influence on one another, but both tend to emphasize a causal arrow that goes in one direction: Society (or social structure, the economic base, or class relations) causes (or determines, shapes, or influences) culture. In terms of the cultural diamond, the arrow generally points downward. Yet, if human beings require meaning to organize their lives, culture, as a bearer of meanings, must make something happen in the social world. The arrow must point upward as well.

The social scientist most known for emphasizing this other direction of causality is Max Weber (1864–1920), the German sociologist mentioned in Chapter 1. Like his contemporary Émile Durkheim and like Marx a bit earlier, Weber tried to understand the modern world, especially industrial, capitalist society. Weber did not think that culture simply *caused* social structure. He knew that the influence worked both ways, and in his writing on religion and economic life, he took pains to emphasize that he was looking at "only one side" of the causal relationship and not claiming that religion caused capitalism. The extent to which religion participated in the formation and expansion of the spirit of capitalism interested Weber. He sought correlations between religious beliefs on the one hand and practical behavior and ethics on the other to see how a religious movement might have influenced material culture. In his masterpiece *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* ([1904–1905] 1985), Weber made a powerful case for the influence of cultural meanings on economic life itself and thus on the social world.

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The Anxious Protestants and the World They Built

Weber introduced *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by noting how the West is unique in many respects: in its specialized science and arts, its highly trained officials, its rational law, and most especially its capitalist economic system involving "the pursuit of profit, and forever *renewed* profit, by means of continuous, rational, capitalistic enterprise" (17). Human greed is nothing new; people have always desired acquisition, and every society has housed its capitalists. Unique to the West, according to Weber, is the capitalist organization of human labor, the separation of business from the household, and the dominance of rational bookkeeping. The central problem, then, is not the origin of capitalism itself but rather the ascendancy of bourgeois capitalism with its rational organization of free labor. Putting the problem another way, Weber claimed interest in origins of the bourgeoisie—those sober middle-class capitalists—and their peculiarities. He wanted to explore the side of the causal chain involving how an economic spirit, or the ethos (distinguishing character) of an economic system, reflected a set of religious ideas.

The analysis starts with an observation: Everywhere in Europe, Protestants flocked to commerce, business, and skilled labor far more than Catholics; they were, in other words, overrepresented in capitalist economic activities. Weber considered the spirit of capitalism as involving an ethic or duty, particularly one's duty in a calling, as exemplified by such aphorisms of Benjamin Franklin as "Time is money." In Franklin's writings, Weber finds a mixture of profit seeking and rational calculation. For example, consider the following:

> After industry and frugality, nothing contributes more to the raising of a young man in the world than punctuality and justice in all his dealings; therefore never keep borrowed money an hour beyond the time you promised, lest a disappointment shut up your friend's purse for ever. (49)

This type of thinking seems unique to Western capitalism.

This spirit of capitalism stood in sharp contrast to the traditional attitude, whereby people work only to live according to custom. Those under capitalism work incessantly for profits, going well beyond their needs and driven by a "time is money" type of self-imposed motivation. The ideal type of capitalist was not a hedonist who enjoyed wealth but an ascetic: "He gets nothing out of his wealth for himself, except the irrational sense of having done his job well" (71). If the spirit of capitalism can't be explained by the desire for luxury, neither can it be explained by material conditions. Weber compared fifteenth-century Florence, where capitalism was advanced but

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lacked the distinctive later "spirit," to the eighteenth-century Pennsylvania of Franklin, which had more of the spirit than it did capitalism itself. What was the "background of ideas" that made activity directed toward profit into a morally charged vocation?

The answer lies in two Protestant religious ideas: the calling and predestination. Martin Luther's conception of the calling—the particular vocation to which God has "called" every man and woman—gave a moral justification to worldly activity. This interpretation contrasted with Catholicism, wherein such activity was morally neutral at best. Luther stressed that Providence assigned each person a place in God's scheme and a specific job to do. Pursuit of one's vocation, or one's calling, is a way of serving God.

The idea of a calling might encourage pious Protestants to work hard, but it would not make them endlessly pursue profits without stopping to enjoy their gains. This pattern of action came from another strand in Protestant theology, that involving predestination. As theorized by John Calvin, predestination describes the belief that, at the beginning of time, God destined every individual for heaven or hell; people could do nothing to change their destinies. According to Calvin, God is unknowable and his decrees incomprehensible; he has decided everything, and one must trust in his justice without question.

Such a harsh doctrine, Weber reasoned, would produce a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness for those who believed in it.

> In what was for the man of the age of the Reformation the most important thing in life, his eternal salvation, he was forced to follow his path alone to meet a destiny which had been decreed for him from eternity. (104)

No person, no sacraments, no church, and not even God could help. How was such a religion bearable? Weber said that the Calvinists responded to the psychological pressure by becoming obsessed with seeking hints regarding whether they were destined for salvation. Their clergy made two suggestions: (1) It was one's duty to consider oneself saved (if a person worried openly about going to hell, he or she probably would!), and (2) one might gain self-confidence in one's heavenly destination through worldly activity. Protestants could bolster their conviction of salvation through good works, self-control, and purposeful activity. In contrast to monastic withdrawal, such lives epitomized what Weber called "innerworldly asceticism," in which Calvinists enacted their religious beliefs in the workshops, markets, and households where they lived their lives.

Weber saw the Puritan as a man concerned with monitoring his own state of grace, engaged in endless moral bookkeeping and the methodical

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Christianization of his entire life. He labored hard in his calling but did not spend or enjoy his profits. If successful, he just worked harder; he could never rest, for complacency might signify damnation. Such a pattern of behavior had two results: (1) It built up the capital of those who practiced it (all of those unspent profits were available for investment), and (2) it developed an attitude toward hard work as a "good thing" for its own sake, a foreign idea to the traditional assumption that work was just a means to an end. The spirit of capitalism lasted long after the particular religious beliefs themselves (e.g., a strict belief in predestination) had atrophied. Indeed, Weber saw the spirit of capitalism operating in his own day, and in many respects it persists in ours as well.

The Cultural Switchman

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* Weber showed how a set of religious ideas influenced the way people worked, spent their money, and ordered their economic lives. The result of a particular religion-based form of economic behavior helped give rise to the Western form of capitalism that has dominated the world economy for three centuries. Thus, this "side of the causal chain" maps onto our cultural diamond as the way that culture causes, influences, or is reflected in the social world.

Weber himself did not want to deny that people pursued their material interests—to this extent he endorsed Marx's *homo faber* as a starting point—but he contended that their ideas, their cultures, shaped just how they pursued these interests. In a famous metaphor, he once compared the role of culture to that of a railroad switchman:

> Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the "world images" that have been created by "ideas" have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest. (1946:280)

Thus, the Calvinists had material interests (earning a living) and ideal interests (salvation). A set of religious world images involving a calling and predestination set the tracks along which they pursued these interests by making these pursuits meaningful. And along those tracks, Western capitalists and workers still run their economic lives.

Like functionalism and Marxism, the Weberian model that social action reflects cultural meanings has directed much sociological research, especially attempts to explain broad social change. For example, when Jack Goldstone (1991) sought to explain the wave of revolutions that convulsed Europe and Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, he showed that sudden

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population increases triggered a set of factors—government incapacity, elite conflict, and popular discontent—that led to state breakdown and rebellion. But then a new puzzle emerged: Why did these structural factors lead to revolution in the West (England, France) but not in the East (the Ottoman Empire, China)? Goldstone found the answer in Weber's cultural switchman model. The Western religious tradition was linear and eschatological; when a change occurred, such as the coming of the Messiah, it was once and for all. Revolutionary action made sense in this meaning system, for history has a direction, total transformations are possible, and things can get better. Eastern religions, on the other hand, view history as cyclical, not linear. This way of thinking did not "switch" political and economic grievances toward revolutionary action but encouraged a return to previous forms of authority.

The "switchman" operates at the individual level as well. Lisa Keister's research on contemporary Americans focuses on the Weberian link between religion and economic behavior. She finds that conservative Protestants tend to accumulate less wealth than other groups (holding constant such things as education and income) because they adhere to a model of stewardship (money is not your own but the Lord's) that demands that they give their money away freely, while Roman Catholics accumulate more wealth because they have strong family orientations that demand they save and make only low-risk investments (Keister 2007, 2008).

The reflection model—whether we emphasize the causal direction from culture to social world or the reverse—proves most persuasive when used to reveal previously hidden correspondences between society and culture. In other words, although the mirror metaphor can mislead if it is taken too literally and excludes other points of the cultural diamond, it can nevertheless reveal significant parallels between cultural objects and their social world.

Meaning Systems or a Tool Kit?

How far should we go with this idea of cultural/social correspondences? The classical views summed up in the reflection model emphasize a close relationship between culture and human activity, but in recent years this assumption has come under sharp attack. Many sociologists now argue that the culture/social world connections are loose, that all cultures are more fragmented than coherent, and that the Weberian image of culture providing a systematic set of ideas and values by which people orient their behavior is fundamentally misleading.

Two general critiques of the Weberian culture-and-meaning position have been made. First, it is too subjective. Robert Wuthnow (1987) argues that Weber's approach to culture, and that of people in this tradition like Geertz,

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requires sociologists to get inside people's heads. Wuthnow maintains that we should think of culture as observable behavior rather than a subjective system of meaning generation. Sociologists should not try to be psychoanalysts.

Second, although such a view of culture seems to envision hard and fast rules for behavior, observation shows that people behave in contradictory ways, that they say one thing and do another, and that their cultures do not steer them as Weber suggested. Sewell (1992) posits that the image of cultural rules is too formal and rigid. Instead, he prefers to think in terms of cultural schemas, informal presuppositions that lie behind more formal rules. These schemas can operate at various levels, from trivial points of etiquette to deep values or unconscious binary systems, and can transfer to new situations.

Ann Swidler (1986, 2001) maintains that cultures are more like tool kits than switchmen, in that they contain rationales underlying various lines of action that can be drawn upon in different contexts, but these rationales are not internally coherent. She demonstrates her thesis by showing how middle-class Americans have two distinct ideologies of love. They can articulate the romantic "till death do us part" ideal of a mutual love that weathers all adversity; they also express a second, much more qualified and contingent, "so long as my partner meets my needs" ideology. These ideologies are not just different but contradictory, yet Swidler shows that people readily use both of them. People have multiple cultural repertoires, and they use them more as bases for "echolocation" than as some restrictive road map. The contradictions don't paralyze people, however, as a more systematic meaning underlying action theory would predict, and they don't because people draw on different ideological resources under different situations.

By the end of the twentieth century, many cultural sociologists had come to accept this more fragmented model of culture. The idea of strong culture—coherent meaning systems steering action—had largely given way to a view of looser and contingent relationships between culture and action. The events of September 11, 2001, led many people to reconsider the role cultural meaning systems play in directing behavior. The world scrambled to understand an Islamist worldview that could justify acts of religious terrorism. Under the circumstances, it once again seemed plausible to think of coherent cultural systems, generators of meaning for entire societies.

Meaning, Modernity, and the Clash of Cultures

Conflict between Muslims and the Judeo-Christian West have stained the opening pages of the twenty-first century with blood. The September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon; the bombings in

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Bali, Saudi Arabia, Madrid, and London; the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; attacks on Christian churches in Pakistan and Lebanon; the endless bloodshed that Israelis and Palestinians have visited upon each other—all of these horrific events seem to offer evidence of a "coherent" culture rooted in the Islamic world. To some, they even seem to support a "clash of civilizations" thesis.

Originally set forth in a *Foreign Affairs* article that political scientist Samuel Huntington wrote in 1995 and then further expanded in a book published the next year, this thesis argues that since the end of the Cold War, the fault lines in the contemporary world have become more cultural than economic or political. A number of civilizations rooted in different religious cultures interpret the world very differently. These different interpretations inevitably produce fundamental conflicts over meanings. Particularly problematic is the gap between the beliefs, goals, and values of the Islamic arc stretching from Indonesia to Morocco on the one hand and the West—Europe and North America—on the other.

Huntington's thesis of a war between civilizations based on different cultural foundations is hotly debated, and many sociologists think the thesis oversimplifies and obfuscates. Although radical Islamists may indeed see the world in these terms (Wright 2006), Palestinian liberationists have only weak links to Islam, Iraq under Saddam Hussein was militantly secular, and most Muslims abhor terrorism. So to translate Huntington's ideas into a binary image of culture wars would be a mistake, as would assuming that Islamic cultures are any more coherent than other cultures; ideological writings belie the fragmented cultural "tools" that most people use. At the same time, however, we cannot just dismiss the impact of deep-seated differences in the worldviews. "Culture matters," as the title of a book edited by Lawrence Harrison and Huntington (2001) points out, and the challenge is to see how it matters.

Sociologists have had a hard time doing so because, following the lead of its founding fathers, the discipline has supposed that the bases for cultural clashes—religion, ethnicity, and different worldviews—were disappearing. This basic disciplinary assumption appears wrong. Twenty-first century assertions of religious and ethnic particularism are robust. They reveal a more general phenomenon: the failure of modernity to realize its goal of enlightened humanism. Ever since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Western social thought in general has regarded the modern era as strikingly different from any that preceded it. Modernity was seen as the stage in social evolution characterized by reason and the rational application of human ingenuity to nature; by popular participation in determining government leaders and policies; by secularization, freedom from superstition and myths; by technological advances, generally involving industrialization; by urbanization; by universal education; and by possible, if not inevitable, victory over disease and want.

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The discipline of sociology, furthermore, has been first and foremost the science of modernity. Sociology's founding fathers—Marx, Durkheim, and Weber—all envisioned a modern society in which particular or ascribed characteristics, things we received at birth, such as skin color, family name, religion, or region of origin, would matter less and less. They envisioned a society of specialized knowledge, where positions were filled by individual merit, where human freedom was in tension with impersonal bureaucracies, and where everything was clear and efficient, though possibly soulless as well.

For good or ill, society, even in advanced industrial/postindustrial societies, has not experienced the expected transformations. Affinities of race and ethnicity persist. Religion has not faded away, and the idea of religious war to the death has proved irresistible to many. Traditions, whether genuinely old or invented, have remained compelling. And modernity itself has prompted strong cultural reactions in two directions: postmodernism and fundamentalism.

Postmodernism is the term many people now apply to the culture of contemporary society, just as modernism—abstract art, atonal music, psychoanalysis, stream-of-consciousness fiction, starkly functional architecture, and the anomie produced by rapid social change—was the culture of modern society. Many people believe that society has entered this new stage beyond modernity, a postindustrial stage of social development dominated by media images, in which people connect with other places and other times through proliferating channels of information. If the modern person was characterized by hope and anxiety, the postmodern person is characterized by a cool absence of illusion. Modern minds were skeptical; postmodern minds are cynical.

We will return to the subject of postmodernism in Chapter 7. For now, let's consider only one aspect of postmodern (or late modern) culture, the declining belief in foundational narratives. Earlier eras seemed always to have defining stories (narratives) that produced meaning and constituted the lens through which people interpreted their experience. In the European Middle Ages, for example, the story was Christian history: the Creation, Adam's fall, Christ's life, the period awaiting Christ's return (in which the "present" was invariably located), the Second Coming, and the Last Judgment. The modern period produced equivalent secular narratives that featured the drama of social progress (whereby humanity evolved, through competition, toward ever more complex and higher forms) or the drama of Marxism (whereby class conflicts moved through a series of economic stages from feudalism to capitalism and, ultimately, Communism).

Theorists of postmodernity argue that many people no longer believe in such master stories. Instead exists a growing sense that life is without meaning and that culture is only a play of images without reference to some

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underlying reality. Postmodern cultural objects exhibit freedom and exuberance; because signifiers need not connect with any specific meanings, a postmodern building can have Gothic spires, Renaissance arches, modern windows, and a Spanish colonial courtyard, and only a fool mired in some meta-narrative would try to interpret such a building. At the same time, the celebration of meaninglessness—making a virtue out of anomie—can result in an empty nihilism. Such developments have produced an exceedingly strong countermovement, one that appears worldwide: the impulse toward religious fundamentalism.

Fundamentalisms appear in many forms: Hindus tearing down the mosques in India; Israeli Jewish settlers basing claims to West Bank land on scriptural authority; Shiite Muslims establishing a puritanical theocracy in Iran; and American Christians demanding prayer in, and sex education out of, schools. All such movements share the vehement rejection of certain aspects of modernity (Emerson and Hartman 2006). Social changes appear to impinge on their most sacred values. Some fundamentalists retreat from "the world," attempting to live according to their own lights, like the Amish in rural America. Others attack.

Although sociology as a discipline generally assumes increasing secularization and postmodernists celebrate it, fundamentalists assert the older claims of religion and traditional social patterns, which they regard as justified by religion. Their single-mindedness and passionate commitment attract many to their cause, for they offer a fixed set of meanings and interpretations, often based on a religious text, that provides stability in a chaotic world. In other words, they offer a culture with clear meanings. The statements of Osama bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders reveal this very clearly. Ironically, in adhering to a fundamentalist meaning system to ward off chaos, religious radicals end up unleashing that very chaos.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we considered the relationship between culture and meaning. We saw how human beings require meaningful orientation for their lives and how culture provides such orientation. We looked at the origin and history of reflection theory. We looked at several modern sociological theories of how culture, as a bearer of meaning, connects with the social world. Some of these theories, such as Marx's, perpetuate a classical reflection model whereby culture reflects social structure like a mirror. Others, notably that of Weber, emphasize how social structures respond to cultural meanings. These Weberian theories of culture providing meaning have drawn criticism

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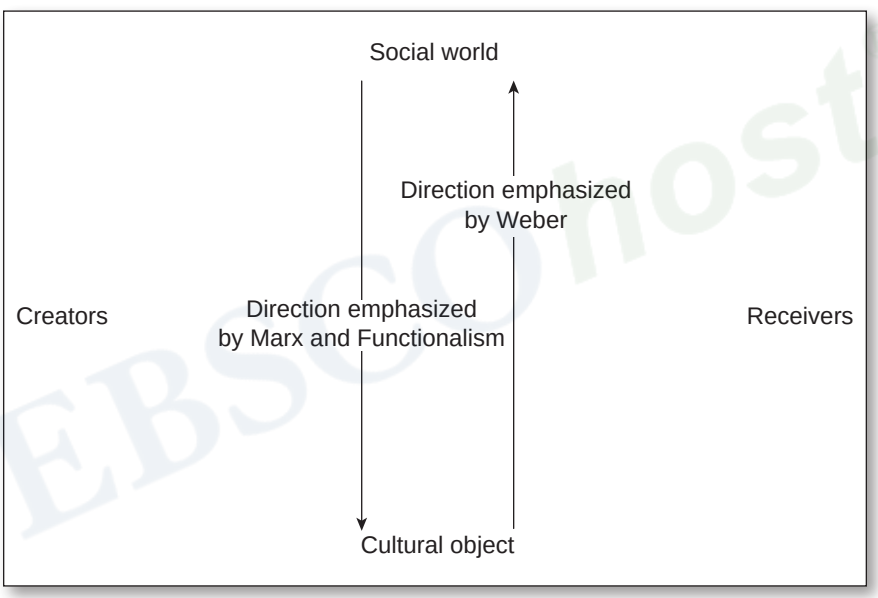
for being too directive, for giving culture coherence and power that it may not always have. But conflicts between Islamists and the West have given such strong culture theories a renewed plausibility.

If we return to the cultural diamond for a moment, we notice that all of these culture-as-meaning theories share one thing, as Figure 2.3 indicates: They concentrate on the vertical axis of the diamond. The left point of cultural creation, the right point of cultural reception, and the five links beyond the vertical axis are virtually ignored.

Figure 2.3 Reflection and the Cultural Diamond



For all their power and plausibility, the theories that concentrate on relating cultural meaning to the social world downplay the role of human agency, of active human beings who produce the ideas, the theologies, the art, the media, and the popular culture that are the vessels of meaning. Similarly, these theories downplay the thoughts and actions of those who receive the cultural messages, who interpret, accept, or reject some of the suggested meanings. In this de-emphasis, they may be considered incomplete. Accordingly, in the following two chapters, we concentrate on the facets of the cultural diamond that have thus far been neglected: the social basis for cultural creation, production, and reception.

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QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. It has been said that culture works by providing stories—in other words, that people draw upon a cultural repertoire of stories to understand who they are and how they should live their lives. Discuss the pros and cons of this view. How does it relate to the reflection model? What could such stories enable people to do, and how could such stories constrain or mislead people?
2. Must all cultural objects be meaningful? Why or why not? Think of examples of cultural objects that seem saturated with meaning and others that seem meaningless. How could both be part of the same culture?

RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING

Farrer, James. 2002. *Opening Up: Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform in Shanghai*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Farrer gives an ethnography of dance clubs, courtship, and the fast life in urban China. He shows how rapid revisions of the sexual culture, responding to both Western and traditional Chinese models, provide meaning and orientation for young Chinese as their world undergoes dramatic social change.

Swidler, Ann. 2001. *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Rejecting the coherent view of culture as switchman, Swidler gives a brilliant analysis of how culture works in people's everyday lives.

Weber, Max. [1904–1905] 1985. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons; introduced by Anthony Giddens. London, England, and Boston, MA: Unwin Paperbacks. Weber's classic is indispensable to the debate over culture and meaning.

Wuthnow, Robert. 2003. *All in Sync: How Music and Art Are Revitalizing American Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Wuthnow takes a close look at how contemporary American religion uses the arts, from hip-hop to modern dance to Renaissance paintings, to convey spiritual meanings.

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